CONNECTING RURAL BUSINESSES & COMMUNITIES

Researchers at the University of Lincoln have explored the role of Digital Hubs and their potential for enhancing the rural digital landscape, identifying the essential building blocks needed to provide a range of benefits to users.

University of Lincoln research has:

➡️ Developed a definition of 'Digital Hubs' and their place in rural communities and business settings.

➡️ Built a typology of Digital Hubs and identified the benefits these different types can bring to business owners, employees and citizens.

➡️ Created a guide to setting the Digital Hubs, covering ten fundamental aspects from leadership, to skills and service users.

"If we are striving for a Europe of equal opportunities, it is unacceptable that 40% of people in rural areas still do not have access to fast broadband connections." So said EU President von der Leyen in her 2020 State of the Union Address. Despite different policy interventions intended to address this lack of connectivity, the so-called 'rural digital divide' clearly still remains, impacting both individuals – and their ability to access essential services – and rural businesses, and their capacity to contribute to the rural economy.

Drawing on extensive experience of the rural digital divide in Lincolnshire, researchers at the University are now working as part of a Europe-wide collaboration called CORA, or COnnecting Remote Areas with digital infrastructure and services. This project is aiming to stimulate digital infrastructure, skills and services in rural areas of the North Sea region, and the Lincoln team is focusing on developing evidence and practical guidance on region-specific Digital Hubs.

UNDERSTANDING THE RURAL DIGITIAL DIVIDE

Researchers from the Lincoln International Business School have worked over the past two decades to create a body of knowledge on the rural digital divide. The team has applied this expertise to create a new understanding of the challenges and opportunities for rural connectivity and digital demand for both citizens and businesses in rural Lincolnshire. This focus on the rural digital divide has enabled the team to become part of the Europe-wide CORA collaboration, looking at digital connectivity in the North Sea region.

DEFINING DIGITAL HUBS

As the team began their research, they found a proliferation of terms that were being used to describe Digital Hubs. By surveying existing Digital Hubs in Europe and other CORA participants, the team was able to create a definition of Digital Hubs that could be used throughout the project:

"A physical space, which can be fixed or mobile, focused on digital connectivity, digital skills and/or emergent technologies. The space will be available to either the public, businesses, or local authorities (or a combination) with the aim of enhancing the local digital environment."

DEVELOPING A TYPOLOGY

The Lincoln team understood that – for policymakers, investors and founders in particular – a clear typology was essential to ensure that the right type of hub was developed in each specific region. Building on their definition, and drawing on what they had learned from the earlier research, the Lincoln team went on to create a typology of Digital Hubs, providing valuable evidence on the benefits of different approaches.The typology identifies four different hub types:

Public Internet Access Point
- Aim: Provide access to high speed internet
- May also provide ICT training sessions or target a specific group
- Location: Often in public buildings, possibly with other public services, e.g. libraries
- Scale: Local

Incubator / Co-working Space
- Aim: Provide space for meeting, networking and collaborating alongside access to technology
- Often focus on businesses, start-ups and entrepreneurs
- Location: Often located within business centres or co-located with a business
- Scale: Regional

Advice, Training and Support Space
- Aim: Provide businesses and citizens with training, advice and support in ICT
- Often focus on more general digital skill development
- Location: Often in public buildings, but can be co-located with a business or in a business district
- Sometimes run alongside a PIAP
- Scale: Regional

Sector-specific Space
- Aim: Provide access to a specific range of technology that can be experimented with by users, often from a specific sector
- Often includes technology such as 3D printers, scanners, robotics
- Location: Typically within a business or research setting
- Scale: Regional

IMPACT ON POLICY

By defining Digital Hubs and identifying four specific types, the Lincoln team has created an evidence base that can be used by policy makers at local and regional levels, enabling them to make better-informed decisions about which type of hub is most relevant to their specific communities and businesses. The team has presented the digital hub guide to a range of organisations and local authorities across Europe.

The accompanying guide to establishing a rural Digital Hub explores ten essential elements that are required to create a successful hub, from leadership and finances to service users, stakeholders and skills. Like the typology, this practical information can be used by decision makers to inform the allocation of resources. The guide is available online here.

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